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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 18 December 1981

STRICTNESS AND LAXITY

One time a student asked Shih-fu Sheng-Yen about the way he conducts retreats in Taiwan compared to in America. After reading some accounts of retreat experiences written by participants of Shih-fu's retreats in Taiwan, he had the impression that Shih-fu imposed stricter standards and made more stringent demands on the students in Taiwan than he did on the American students. Shih-fu responded by saying that basically there was no difference in his treatment of Asians and Americans. It is just that in different cultural environments the people may be more or less willing to accept extremely strict methods. That is, there will be no different approach towards Chinese and Americans participating together on a retreat in America, whereas it might differ in another cultural context. However, even within one culture, Shih-fu's approach will also vary from retreat to retreat in order to adapt to the different situations of each individual participant at the time. To illustrate, he told this story:

A certain middle-aged overseas Chinese woman who lives in Florida returned to Taiwan on a visit. At that time she expressed a desire to join a Ch'an retreat with Shih-fu. But Shih-fu said, "No, you have come to Taiwan on a pleasure trip. You should be enjoying yourself, not undertaking a difficult practice." But she said, "The opportunity for this kind of practice is very hard to come by. I would like to give it a try." Shih-fu asked her, "Can you meditate?" She said, "No." Shih-fu said, "If you can't meditate, how can you participate on the retreat?" She answered, "I haven't come here to practice meditation. I have come here to discipline my mind." Shih-fu said, "This is very interesting. O.K. I'll let you try. When everyone gets up in the morning, you may continue to sleep. During the meditation periods, if you wish, you can get up and take a walk. If you feel bored, you can always leave the meditation hall. If you feel inclined to sit, you may join the others in the hall so long as you don't disturb the others' practice. You don't even have to sit on a cushion; you can even sit on a chair." When the woman heard this, she said, "This is all quite fine. But why are you treating me different than the others?" Shih-fu said, "I don't believe you are really ready to practice. I think you have come here basically to have a nice time."

There was another woman participant who was more advanced in years, and although she had studied meditation, Shih-fu had also given her permission to take it easier

because she had told Shih-fu, "I am very old already and I can't take a very rough schedule. If I don't get enough sleep, I may not be able to last through the day. If I sit for too long a stretch, my back and legs will hurt and I won't be able to stand it." So Shih-fu told them, "The two of you are a special case. You should both sleep in the same room together. In fact, it doesn't matter whether you show up on time for meals or not. You are free to do what you like."

In the beginning the two ladies were having a good time. When, after sitting for a time in the meditation hall, they felt a bit tired, they would take a look at each other, and if one of them was ready to get up the other would get up. They came and left the hall together. In the evening, when one saw that the other was ready to go to sleep, she would also get up and the two of them would go off to sleep, even though the others were still meditating.

But after three days of this, they noticed that everyone else was practicing very hard and they began to have strange feelings. They asked Shih-fu, "What have we come here for?" And Shih-fu said, "Haven't you come here to practice?" They answered, "But if we continue practicing the way we have been for the last three days, then even after seven days it is doubtful whether we can get any benefit from this retreat." Shih-fu said, "O.K. In that case, would you like to join the others? However, I will not enforce any strict rules on you, you can still do whatever you like. So the two ladies decided to try imitating the others and follow the strict rules. On the fourth day of the retreat, they went through a lot of pain and suffering. By the fifth day, they developed a strong sense of shame, the old woman thinking that her days were numbered and she didn't have much time left for practice, and the woman from Florida thinking that it was very rare indeed to be able to return to Taiwan and practice on a retreat such as this. She should not have wasted her time. She thought, "Even if I die in the meditation hall, so be it. I will not get up to go to sleep earlier. I will do just as the young people here." In fact, when she noticed some of the others shifting around, she thought, "These youngsters really don't have any idea what the practice is all about. Only we older ones know what it means to practice. Our time is almost up. They are still young and healthy, why don't they work harder?"

One time the older woman sat down and did not move for a long time. The younger woman from Florida thought, "She's so old and yet she can sit there not moving for so long. I must be able to do the same thing." So she was actually competing with the old lady. After two hours she couldn't take it anymore. She was ready to stand up. But she saw that the old lady was still sitting there. And she decided, "Forget about it! I'd rather die in the meditation hall than get up from my seat. If the old lady can do it I can do it." In the end, the old woman sat for four hours and she sat for six hours straight. Out of all the participants in the retreat, it was those two, and especially the woman from Florida, who obtained the best result.

This all shows that in the practice of Ch'an, there are no hard and fast rules regarding strictness or laxity. Rather, it varies according to different situations. As a rule, if you don't enforce strict rules on young people, they may take it too easy and eventually just leave. But older people and those in special situations may feel a strong sense of shame in that they may lose the opportunity to practice, and regardless of the looseness of the rules, they may instead work very hard and achieve the best results.

NEWS ITEMS

Lectures given by Master Sheng-Yen:

On Nov. 20, Shih-fu lectured at Columbia University on the history, practice, and phenomena of Ch'an.

On Dec. 8, Shih-fu gave a talk at Rutgers University, at the invitation of the Meditation Club, on the methods of Ch'an practice.

On Dec. 9, Shih-fu spoke at the New School for Social Research, invited by Dharma Master Bup-An, outlining the history of the Ch'an sect in China.

Visitors to the Ch'an Center

On Nov. 14 a dinner was held at the center for Upasaka P.Y. Chang, prominent patron of Buddhism in Taiwan.

Geshe Thupten Wangyal, a high-ranking scholar from Tibet who teaches Tibetan Buddhist culture at Rutgers Univ., visited Master Sheng-Yen on Nov. 21.

On Dec. 7, Ch'an Center member Nancy Makso, teacher of English as a second language at Cambridge School, brought her class of international students to the center to visit and exchange questions and answers regarding Ch'an and meditation.

Mr. and Mrs. Hwang, a young couple from Singapore, stayed at the center for 3 weeks. They came to the U.S. solely to participate on the recent week-long retreat.

Shih-fu will be returning to Taiwan on Sunday evening, January 10, for a stay of approximately three months. On that day, everyone is welcome to join us at the center for a farewell lunch (12:00) and to hear Shih-fu's last Dharma talk (1:15).

Sunday is an "open house" for all visitors. The schedule of activities is as follows:

- A.M. 9:00 Free meditation
- 10:30 Chanting Buddha's name
- 11:30 Midday Offering
- P.M. 12:00 Vegetarian Lunch (donation)
- 1:15 Dharma Lecture by Master Sheng-Yen, or in his absence, discussion group led by Ch'an Center members or invited guests.
- 2:45 Guided meditation activities
- Free instruction by Ch'an Center staff for newcomers.
- 5:00 Evening Service

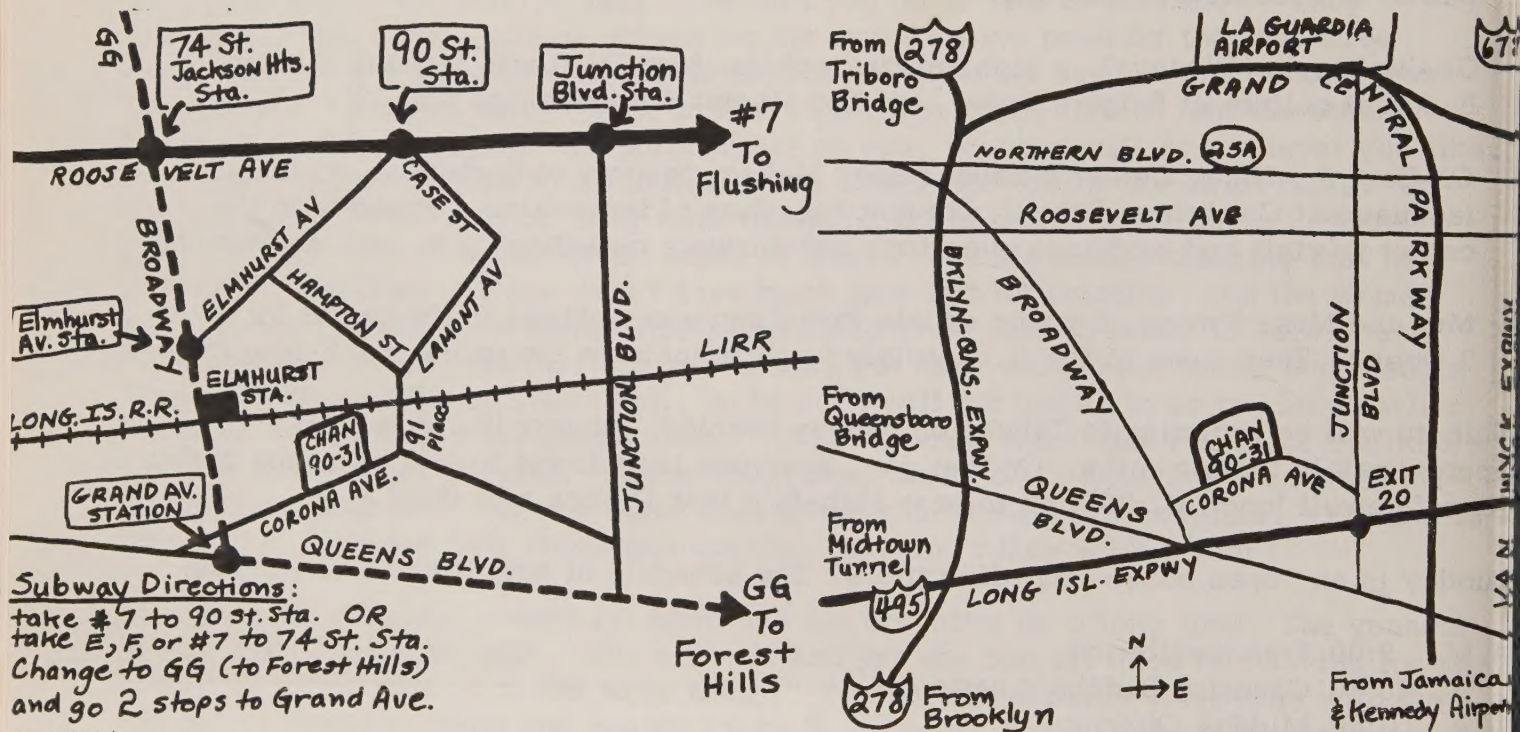
For more information on Ch'an Center activities, call or write:

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The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.



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